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Multi-Perspective Systems Thinking Arrives at School

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Academic Leadership Journal

Multi-Perspective Systems Thinking Arrives at School

Managers who cling, dogmatically and unquestioningly, to a single view of leadership are especially apt to fail in educational institutions, where critical thinking and serious debate are part of the daily routine. Such unskilled application of simplistic leadership philosophies is seen even more often now that the corporate model, and its focus on basic accountability, is being integrated into the educational sector. Today's educational administrators desperately need sophisticated training to help them apply for-profit methodologies to the more value-based and institutionalized educational arena.

Roundtable Viewpoints: Educational Leadership provides educators a valuable introduction to the thoughtfully conceived concept of "embedded leadership": the notion that management is complex, situational, and dependent upon perspective. Joyce Huth Munro, the editor of the text, presents 39 readings that focus on 10 educational sector issues, ranging from the universal "How Do Educational Leaders Shape Organizational Culture?" to the more specific and localized, such as "What Is the Impact of Accountability Legislation on Educational Organizations?" Munro's selection of issues is comprehensive, covering the wide assortment of challenges facing today's educational administrators; her selection of readings is equally diverse, varying in temperament, narrative style, and formality.

Munro expertly frames the dialogue about each issue with a brief introduction that concisely and authoritatively outlines the various approaches to the matter. While her general tone is that of an objective facilitator, she does, when necessary, provide critical commentary about the shortcomings, limitations, or unstated assumptions of a particular approach. Following the readings on each issue, Munro supplies a summary that re-examines the various approaches and provides a useful but not comprehensive list of additional resources. A critical thinking exercise is included after each summary, but not all succeed in stimulating rigorous issue analysis.

Munro's strength is clearly in her command of the most recent and most sophisticated approaches to educational leadership. (In one Issue Summary, she effortlessly segues from the flaws of conventional strategic planning in schools to one contributor's use of chaos theory and quantum physics.) Munro is also a highly skilled facilitator and models the very behavior she is hoping to inculcate in her readers. This real-time embedded leadership is exactly what makes the text so extremely effective: using a conscientiously constructed introduction and carefully selected reading selections, Munro creates a dialogue among leaders with considerably different viewpoints and communication styles—a typical scenario in educational institutions.

Munro's reading selections include not only such indispensable pieces as Russell L. Ackoff's "On Learning and the Systems That Facilitate It," but also writings such as Kim Marshall's "It's Time to Rethink Teacher Supervision and Evaluation," which capture the heart of dedicated and thoughtful educational administrators. Given Munro's predilection for the very careful objectivity required of the systems approach to leadership, the compilation is weighted towards objective and methodical selections. There could, however, be some benefit from additional contributions that capture the

personal spirit and individual commitment of highly notable educational leaders, who are quite often solely responsible for a particular institution's success. (It should be noted that uncritical reliance on this approach, often referred to as "Great Leader Theory," has led to numerous disasters not only in educational institutions, but in corporations and nations as well.)

Roundtable Viewpoints: Educational Leadership requires a sophisticated reader, one who has had enough theoretical and practical exposure to management to know that one mantra does not work for all leaders at all times. For such seasoned and thoughtful students, Munro's work is a priceless laboratory for sharpening their embedded leadership skills.

References

Munro, J. H. (Ed.). (2008).

Roundtable viewpoints: Educational leadership. New York: McGraw-Hill.

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